

BLIND-FOLDED

By EARLE
ASHLEY
WALCOTT

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CHAPTER I.

A Dangerous Errand.

A city of hills with a fringe of houses crowning the lower heights; half-mountains rising bare in the background and becoming real mountains as they stretched away in the distance to right and left; a confused mass of buildings coming to the water's edge on the flat; a forest of masts, ships swinging in the stream, and the streaked, yellow, gray-green water of the bay taking a cold light from the setting sun as it struggled through the wisps of fog that fluttered above the serrated sky-line of the city—these were my first impressions of San Francisco.

The wind blew fresh and chill from the west with the damp and salt of the Pacific heavy upon it, as I breathed it from the forward deck of the ferry steamer, El Capitan. As I drank in the air and was silent with admiration of the beautiful panorama that was spread before me, my companion touched me on the arm.

"Come into my cabin," he said. "You'll be one of those fellows who can't come to San Francisco without catching his death of cold, and then lays it on to the climate instead of his own lack of common sense. Come, I can't spare you, now I've got you here at last. I wouldn't lose you for a million dollars."

"I'll come for half the money," I returned, as he took me by the arm and led me into the close cabin.

My companion, I should explain, was Henry Wilton, the son of my father's cousin, who had the advantages of a few years of residence in California, and sported all the airs of a pioneer. We had been close friends through boyhood and youth, and it was on his offer of employment that I had come to the city by the Golden Gate.

"What a resemblance!" I heard a woman exclaim, as we entered the cabin. "They must be twins."

"There, Henry," I whispered with a laugh; "you see we are discovered." Though our relationship was not close we had been cast in the mold of some common ancestor. We were so nearly alike in form and feature as to perplex all but our intimate acquaintances, and we had made the resemblance the occasion of many tricks in our boyhood days.

Henry had heard the exclamation as well as I. To my surprise, it appeared to bring him annoyance or apprehension rather than amusement.

"I had forgotten that it would make us conspicuous," he said, more to himself than to me, I thought; and he glanced through the cabin as though he looked for some peril.

"We were used to that long ago," I said, as we found a seat. "Is the business ready for me? You wrote that you thought it would be in hand by the time I got here."

"We can't talk about it here," he said in a low tone. "There is plenty of work to be done. It's not hard, but, as I wrote you, it needs a man of pluck and discretion. It's a delicate business, you understand, and dangerous if you can't keep your head. But the danger won't be yours. I've got that end of it."

"Of course you're not trying to do anything against the law?" I said. "Oh, it has nothing to do with the law," he replied with an odd smile. "In fact, it's a little matter in which we are—well, you might say—outside the law."

I gave a gasp at this distressing suggestion, and Henry chuckled as he saw the consternation written on my face. Then he rose and said:

"Come, the boat is getting in."

"But I want to know—" I began.

"Oh, bother your 'want-to-knows.' It's not against the law—just outside it, you understand. I'll tell you more of it when we get to my room. Give me that valise. Come along now."

And as the boat entered the slip we found ourselves at the front of the pressing crowd that is always surging in and out of San Francisco by the gateway of the Market Street ferry.

As we pushed our way through the clamoring hack-drivers and hotel-runners who blocked the entrance to the city, I was roused by a sudden thrill of the instinct of danger that warns one when he meets the eye of a snake. It was gone in an instant, but I had time to trace effect to cause. The warning came this time from the eyes of a man, a lithe, keen-faced man who flashed a look of triumphant malice on us as he disappeared in the waiting-room of the ferry-shed. But the keen face and the basilisk glance were burned into my mind in that moment as deeply as though I had known then what evil was behind them.

My companion swore softly to himself.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Don't look around," he said. "We are watched."

"The snake-eyed man?"

"Did you see him, too?" His manner was careless, but his tone was troubled. "I thought I had given him the slip," he continued. "Well, there's no help for it now."

"Are we to hunt for a hiding-place?" I asked doubtfully.

"Oh, no; not now. I was going to take you direct to my room. Now we are going to a hotel with all the publicity we can get. Here we are."

In another moment we were in a lumbering coach, and were whirling over the rough pavement, through a confusing maze of streets, past long rows of dingy, ugly buildings, to the hotel.

"A room for the night," ordered Henry, as we entered the hotel office and saluted the clerk.

"Your brother will sleep with you?" inquired the clerk.

"Yes."

Henry paid the bill, took the key, and we were shown to our room. After removing the travel-stains, I declared myself quite ready to dine.

"We won't need this again," said Henry, tossing the key on the bureau as we left. "Or no, on second thought," he continued, "it's just as well to leave the door locked. There might be some inquisitive callers." And we betook ourselves to a hasty meal that was not of a nature to raise my opinion of San Francisco.

"Are you through?" asked my companion, as I shook my head over a melancholy piece of pie, and laid down my fork. "Well, take your bag. This door—look pleasant and say nothing."

He led the way to the bar and then through a back room or two, until with a turn we were in a blind alley. After a pause to observe the street before we ventured forth, Henry said:

"I guess we're all right now. We must chance it, anyhow." So we dodged along in the shadow till we came to Montgomery Street, and after a brief walk, turned into a gloomy doorway and mounted a worn pair of stairs.

The house was three stories in height. It stood on the corner of an alley, and the lower floor was intended for a store or saloon; but a renting agent's sign and a collection of old show-bills ornamenting the dirty windows testified that it was vacant.

"This isn't just the place I'd choose for entertaining friends," said Henry, with a visible relief from his uneasiness, as we climbed the worn and dirty stair.

"Oh, that's all right," I said, magnanimously accepting his apology.

"It doesn't have all the modern conveniences," admitted Henry as we stumbled up the second flight, "but it's suitable to the business we have in hand, and—"

"What's that?" I exclaimed, as a creaking, rasping sound came from the hall below.

We stopped and listened, peering into obscurity beneath.

"It must have been outside," said Henry, and opened the door of the last room on the right of the hall.

The room was at the rear corner of the building. There were two windows, one looking to the west, the



other to the north and opening on the narrow alley.

"Not so bad after you get in," said Henry, half as an introduction, half as an apology.

"It's luxury after six days of half-raiding," I replied.

"Well, lie down there, and make the most of it, then," he said, "for there may be trouble ahead." And he listened again at the crack of the door.

"In Heaven's name, Henry, what's up?" I exclaimed with some temper. "You're as full of mysteries as a dime novel."

Henry smiled grimly.

"Maybe you don't recognize that this is serious business," he said.

I was about to protest that I could not know too much, when Henry raised his hand with a warning to silence. I heard the sound of a cautious step outside. Then Henry sprang to the door, flung it open, and bolted down the passage. There was the gleam of a revolver in his hand I hurried after him, but as I crossed the threshold he was coming softly back, with finger on his lips.

"I must see to the guards again. I can have them together by midnight."

"Can I help?"

"No. Just wait here till I get back. Bolt the door, and let nobody in but

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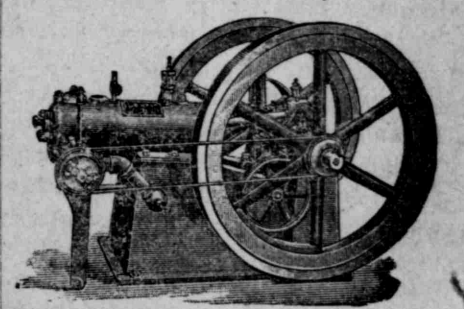


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Praise-God Barebones was a fanatical tanner of London. He became a member of parliament in 1563 and headed a procession of the people in protesting against the restoration of Charles II. to the throne. He was a Baptist minister after 1620 and was quite popular as a preacher.

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